# wordrobe

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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**On the breast of her gown, in red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold-thread, appeared the letter A.**

**Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)**

*Wordrobe* is a reconciliation of textile and text. Textile and text are intrinsically and semantically related; both words derive from *texere* and *text*. Even today we use the locution weaving or spinning a tale to describe a powerful narrative. Apparel was not raised to grammar and rhetoric by Roland Barthes, but it has always been connected with and been an incorporating principle for language, constituting a knowledge of and inscription on the body. Fashion is not the mute, unversed art that some have imagined. On the contrary, like any other visual art, fashion is literate and intelligent, capable of conveying letters and linguistic form. In *The Scarlet Letter,* Hester Prynne's identifying rune is allegorical, one among the many emblems and tokens that fashion carries. The July 1936 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* refers to "Schiaparelli's cellophane belt [which can be ordered] with your name and telephone number written on it." Such an example is a sure sign of personal identity.

Especially in the twentieth century, fashion has taken art's annexation of language as exemplary. Learning is not anathema to the pleasure implied in body art rendered in fashion. Deliberate, occasionally whimsical, writing on the body is a social text. The red A on Hester Prynne's gown represents her stigma; it is the manifestation by which others witness her penalty for adultery and recognize the necessity to ostracize her. Here the text is rendered palpable and socialized—or, in this instance, offered as a sign for nonsocialization—in its fashion version; solitary letter is an agent of denunciation that serves as public notice. Language negotiates our personal expression and the conventions of common understanding, and clothing is woven of like cloth and convention.

As fashion transports personal identity into the realm of public portrayal, it naturally takes names, identifiers, and language with it. Thus, the proclamation in dress is address, a rhetoric that seizes the communal forum. A spring-summer 1997 ensemble by Walter von Bierendonck, working under the label W.&L.T. (Wild and Lethal Trash), features the enigmatic slogan "Welcome Little Stranger," an epigram consonant with 1990s cosmic fantasies. The declaration fulfills Suzy Menkes's earlier reference to the W.&L.T. clothing in an article titled "Crash! Pow! Clothes Go Extraterrestrial" (*International Herald Tribune*, 8-9 July 1995). The ensemble is complemented by a battery-powered glowing panel to be attached to the waist, thus affording a mix of dance-club electricity in memory of Day-Glo and disco lights with the alien and supernatural power and strangeness popular in the visual fictions of the nineties. A future historian inevitably will read such a garment and thereby decode—render some reading—and interpret our time.

In fact, clothing has served as chronicler again and again, either literally incorporating newsprint or reproducing its effects. In a Spanish boy's outfit of the early twentieth century, newspaper has been transferred to silk; the story tells of a contemporary tragedy with the taciturn irony of a Warhol Disaster. Elsa Schiaparelli's several ploys with newspaper print in clothing, millinery, and accessories—after all, if the black-and-white effect of printed news was good enough for Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, it warrants a place in other arts as well—represent her interests in trompe l'oeil, Surrealism, and the immediacy of current events. The same preoccupation

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obtains in art; note the newsprint underlying Jasper Johns's Flag paintings of the 1950s, for example. Even the material itself can bond the like propensities of art and fashion, for example in instances such as the paper dresses of the mid-1960s, which are deeply indebted to the motives and sensibilities of Pop Art. A "Yellow Pages" dress (ca. 1967) recalls Warhol's clipping files and his derivations from favored ads and images from newspapers and magazines. Some thirty years later, Moschino's "Sex Ads" ensemble has sustained the tradition, reverting to black and white. Other ephemera, even more personal, have achieved a role in fashion; a Man Ray photograph published in *Harper's Bazaar* (May 1936) shows a "crazy love-letter cotton print dress of Schiaparelli with a crocheted beach bag and a blue isinglass bonnet." More than mere billets-doux in the sand, the print love letters on a summer dress are immutable without being archival, a celebration of a caring yet carefree exchange. A nineteenth-century handbag is made of folded newspaper rendered as if woven, thus demonstrating an instance of text striving for textile.

Fashion's fascination with language and verbal icons is, of course, related to art's similar propensity in the twentieth century. Surrealism, Pop Art, and Conceptual Art have all rendered language concrete; political art has tendered and rendered manifestoes in words; and contemporary art, almost as mediaphilic as fashion, has announced itself in the elocution of such artists as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Bruce Nauman. Hence, Christian Francis Roth's "Dress-Form" dress (fall-winter 1989-90) extends the Surrealist traits of illusion, transfiguration, body surrogate, and language—all rolled into one. Even as Roth's outer form emulates a body characterization, it also takes the fictive body as if it were the real dress. Roth has pursued the idea with Surrealism's inexorable logic: he stamped the form's stenciled language and size onto the garment, as he likewise gave it a silvery edge like the metal rim of the dress form. The first Surrealists literally used such dress forms in the 1938 Surrealist exhibition in Paris, and Roth has gone further in creating both a plausible dress, elegant in its simplicity, and a statement akin to any declaration in words. Roth has flirted again and again with the principles of the fine arts. His "Dollar Bill" dress (spring-summer 1991) is a tour de force of Warholian subject, but much of its initial cynicism is denied by its crisp wrapping and bill-folding around the body in the manner of a kimono. His "Rothola" crayon dresses (fall-winter 1990-91) and related suits and dresses with scribbles, pencil shavings, and other forms and gestures of inscription not only provide the message but also include the process and means to communicate.

Surrealism subverts Moschino's ironies and linguistic amusements from the purport of advertising and declarations to the clever distance of double entendre and paradox in the fields of language, consumerism, and dress or body. Moschino's gloss on consumerism can, however, barely surpass the sarcasm of Schiaparelli's necktie (ca. 1935) and related apparel of the 1930s derived from her press clippings. Equally, Pauline Trigère's smart, if boastful, ensemble (1973) employing her name boldly also betokens fashion's fetish for designer names. Advertising's presence, indecent to some purists and graphically adventuresome to others, is evident in a special-occasion "Subscribe for the Echo" newspaper dress (ca. 1893), and literal advertising, the convention of portable display, appears on an elegant bowling shirt (ca. 1959) once owned by the front-embroidered "Shirley" and publicizing Sharpe's Department Store of Prague, Oklahoma. (Orthographic slips do occur: the shirt reads "Praque," but can only refer to Prague, population 2,000, the only town of cognate name in Oklahoma.)

Conceptual designers Evans and Wong also play with propriety and consumerism in a "Debutante's Slip" Ultrasuede dress (1996) composed of a cutout text from Emily Post that upholds a standard of decorum that this dress, if worn in lieu of a "proper" lace dress, would scarcely meet. Art history is also an inspiration to such designers as Mary McFadden, whose globalism gives both character and characters to planar garments inspired by Kufic lettering and even Irish medieval manuscripts. The aforementioned Spanish boy's dress outfit with newspaper texts taken from *El Protector* accords with the analysis and sweet pastiche of contemporary discoveries in collage, often including newspapers.

A passionate art of political discourse occurs on and about clothing in contemporary art. Christine LoFaso's "Talismanic" shirt (1994), for example, is a sculpture in the form of a shirt imprinted with a history of her credit card receipts. Such art, piquant in its critique of consumerism, suggests comparison with Schiaparelli's blouse and matching handbag representing the rationing coupons required for any product in the war years of the 1940s. Consumption is exposed, not merely consumed, by apparel, as both a trenchant observer in the 1940s and another, equally acute artist in the 1990s have noted.

Another 1940s dress, the extravagant "Palm Beach" evening ensemble by Nettie Rosenstein with exultant signage and urban graphics and glitter rivaling Stuart Davis's paintings, poses the possibilities of the "shouting" dress. Like an *architecture parlante*, a textile advancing text conveys both a three-dimensional and a two-dimensional rhetoric. Thus, a couture dress of the late 1920s offers an alphabet soup within its sophisticated lace but most importantly insinuates through its own structure the refinement and cultural expression of language, long echoing through the wardrobe, ever articulating word and apparel.

COLLAPSIBLE
MODEL 1989
8

WELCOME
LITTLE
STRANGER
W.&L.T.

du thé
ROBERT
DE MONTESQU
E LE 10

ECHO.
SUBSCRIBE FOR
THE ECHO.

SAFE
SEX
!
MOSCHINO

Sikorsky Transfer, Inc.
873-4504
METRO ELECTRIC
645-2000
FOSTER BROS.
MOVING
Attention Do It Yourself
CALL
Forest
FOR
LUMBER
& BUILDING
SUPPLIES
HARDWARE
CALL 635-0
Forest Lumber
We Can Help You T
call us today 78
HAMDEN
Breezy Boats
SAIL & POWER BOATING
898 1657
HARBORSIDE BOATS, INC
304 MAIN ST.
SALES & SERVICE
Full Line of Parts in S
634-1918
SAIL & POWER

SHARPE'S
DEPT. STORE
PRAQUE, OKLA.

Purple

sixty six coupons
two coupons
three coupons

22

## Captions and Notes to the Illustrations

1. Front Cover: Nettie Rosenstein. "Palm Beach" evening ensemble, 1945. Black and polychrome raw silk. Gift of Nettie Rosenstein, 1946 (CI 46.57 a,b)

Akin to Stuart Davis's urban and signage-graphic acumen is Nettie Rosenstein's enthusiasm for the electricity of advertising design, which she translated into an evening dress with a nonchalant 1940s drape (inspired by Morrocan man's garb). The ensemble has a sensibility for popular culture that anticipates the 1960s and after. Theater marquees, signs for chop suey establishments, and electric signs with cigarette and beverage rendered in brilliant color against a night sky foreshadow the unabashed art of popular visual culture so often captured in words.

Artist Barbara Kruger, of a later generation, commented in 1988, "A city like New York can be seen as a dense cluster of civilization: a rampant bundle of comings and goings veneered with the tumultuous urgency of people busy living and dying. Amidst all this, Times Square has existed as a kind of brazenly pumped-up light show, a mix of touristic travel and insistent loitering. . . . Times Square was, and could be again, this kind of gargantuan yet contained spectacle that perpetually flirts with our senses of wonderment and pleasure."

2. Inside Covers: Details of number 19.

3. Title Page: Left: Elsa Schiaparelli. Necktie, ca. 1935. Off-white silk taffeta. Gift of Richard Martin, 1997 (1997.40.3). Right: Tardy (New York). Necktie, ca. 1935. Black wool. Gift of Carl Van Vechten, 1941 (41.105.97)

Two neckties carry the words of the day, in one case reproducing the printed publicity for the designer and in the other noting the sequence of days, however unsequenced they have become for the sake of design. The textile for Schiaparelli, resembling that used in her 1930s dresses and handbags, was designed by Fornasetti. The tie articulating the days of the week was owned by Carl Van Vechten, one of the great dandies of the period.

4. French. Garters, ca. 1790. Silk ribbon with brocade. Purchase, Irene Lewisohn Bequest, 1976 (1976.235.1a,b)

A pair of garters murmur that there will be no friend more sincere than they. Garters, busks, and lingerie speak again and again of sweet intimacy, as if to imply that this clothing is more tender, loving, and even protective than any human. As gifts, such apparel suggest intimate property and safeguard in the manner of chastity belts, but their rhetoric is more dulcet and gentle.

5. Christian Francis Roth. "Dress-Form" dress, fall-winter 1989-90. Off-white wool jersey. Gift of Amy Fine Collins, 1993 (1993.510.4)

The sunny Surrealism of Roth's work is evident in one of his earliest dresses, a simulation of the dress form. For Roth, the dress is all that it might be intellectually (the simulacrum of the inanimate simulacrum) and emotionally (inhabiting the fictive), but it also has a gleeful cleverness. The words identifying model and size are essential to the meaning, as we might not otherwise recognize Roth's illusionism, so close is the appearance to a conventional dress. The writing on the dress is the primary clue to the disturbed reality of the garment and the disturbed corporeality of the figure.

6. W.&L.T. (Wild and Lethal Trash). Long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans with battery-operated light panel, spring-summer 1997. Lycra shirt; black wool and mixed media pants. Courtesy Richard Martin

Writing on the shirt assumes an aggressive tone, employing in this instance the character of label-maker labels in red on a black field. Thus, the sensibilities of the alien and alienation may be more than compromised by a household or clerical orthography.

7. Jean Charles de Castelbajac. Day jacket, ca. 1992. Black-printed white cotton. Anonymous Gift, 1997 (1997.2.20)

Castelbajac realized concrete poetry of an apparel kind in gargantuan script that becomes magnified to the point of illegibility in any normal social discourse with the wearer. One inexorably either reads or makes social contact, but the two are incompatible in this jacket.

8. American. "Subscribe for the Echo" newspaper dress, ca. 1893. White polished cotton with newspaper appliqués. Purchase, Irene Lewisohn and Alice L. Crowley Bequest Fund, 1994 (1994.275.1 a,b)

This newspaper dress, presumably created for a single occasion, testifies to the place of newsprint in modern culture. Yet the

annexation of text to dress gives it new context: editorial becomes advertising; headlines become graphic art. A hundred years later, this dress finds its artistic echo in Moschino's appropriations of clichés and advertising.

9. Moschino. "Sex Ads" man's day ensemble, ca. 1995. White Rayon and black cotton. Gift of Richard Martin, 1996 (1996.195.2 a,b)

Reverting purposefully to the principles of collage adaptation, Moschino employed sex ads in a menswear ensemble. As in the preceding newspaper dress, the deliberate violation of the segregation of advertising and clothing plays with the modern understanding that dress solicits social acceptance and even sexuality. A shirt and pants with sex ads proclaim their own advertising.

10. Pauline Trigère. Day coat, 1973. Black print on white cotton and black synthetic-leather collar. Gift of Pauline Trigère, 1993 (1993.138.24)

The fetish of the designer label or signature is mocked in this Trigère coat (with matching dress) on which her name is endlessly repeated. Writing of this kind is apparently projected not for the wearer but for the spectator and renders Trigère's name, even in its hypnotic reiteration, a sign manifestly for the benefit of the observer. Critic Harold Rosenberg observed, "A contemporary painting or sculpture is a species of centaur—half art materials, half words." Trigère has made the matching coat.

11. Rudi Gernreich. "Alphabet" minidress and stockings, fall-winter 1968. Black-printed white synthetic jersey. Gift of Jacqueline Loewe Fowler Costume Collection, 1997 (1997.170.1a,b)

Brilliantly of the Pop Art moment, but also quaintly of the Plantin-type-specimen and commercial-copy past, this outfit that covers the body in letters seizes the initiative of the Pop sensibility without sacrificing abstraction, achieved through allover design. Gernreich equivocated here between the tabloid elements of Pop and turn-of-the-century uses of typefaces and lettering as rudimentary graphic art. A letter is an inescapable and unambiguous sign, meant to be understood in one way and not in another, but the appearance of letters out of order and repeated en suite on a garment renders the unequivocal letter as something curiously unfixed and uncertain.

12. American. Paper dress printed with Yellow Pages motif, ca. 1967. Paper. Purchase, Horowitz Gift Fund, Isabel Shults Fund, Hearst Corporation Fund, 1995 (1995.178.2)

With the sensibility of Pop Art, the mundane advertisements of the telephone (itself a motif for Andy Warhol as well as a principal means of modern communication) book are seized for their comic-book primary color and for their primary information.

13. American. Bowling shirt, ca. 1959. Red linen with lettering and embroidery. Courtesy Richard Martin

The front of this bowling shirt identifies the individual ("Shirley"), while the back advertises the team's sponsor. Today leisurewear has come to be covered with advertisements, identities, and teams, often commercial in character. The lowly bowling shirt—though this one is very chic—stands as a base for our culture's proliferation of visible identification on apparel.

14. Ji Eon Kang. "Admission-Button" dress, spring 1997. Beige silk charmeuse appliquéd with metal Metropolitan Museum of Art admission buttons. Gift of Richard Martin, 1997

First shown in the Parsons School of Design student fashion show in May 1997, this dress was created in response to an assignment—from the art and design curricula of the twentieth century—to use objets trouvés. The Museum also owns a construction by the sculptor Arman that uses multiple Metropolitan Museum of Art buttons.

15. Jean Paul Gaultier. Dress printed with Chinese characters, 1994. White and green Nylon crochet. Gift of Richard Martin, 1995 (1995.433.7)

A linguistic polymath in apparel, Gaultier has incorporated Russian, Hebrew, and Eastern alphabets and orthography into his clothing. In this instance, the long cheongsam cling of a dress that in silhouette and design could be elementary Vionnet or basic Asian dress is tipped toward Eastern interpretation by the use of Chinese characters.

16. Christian Francis Roth. "Rothola" crayon dress, fall-winter 1990-91. Pink, purple, and lavender wool jersey. Gift of Amy Fine Collins, 1994 (1994.490.5)

Roth provided the means of graphic expression in his "Rothola" crayon dresses. They are like the instruments of mark making, but they also incorporate the graphic scrawl that is the first symbol or character in a child's writing and art. Like the easily perceived bravado in the icons of Keith Haring in the 1980s, Roth's form-bestowing innocence begins with a child's intuitive perception.

17. Jean Paul Gaultier. Man's graffiti ensemble, 1994. Olive screen-printed cotton jersey and denim. Gift of Richard Martin, 1994 (1994.578.3 a,b)

As graffiti, indigenous to popular culture and the intersection of public communication and private expression, has been fundamental to raw, gestural, linguistic innovations in contemporary art, so too has it played a role in fashion's vocabulary. Like the Futurist and collage devices of the early years of this century, graffiti has set letters, numbers, and words free—as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti argued in his manifesto of 1912—from the constraints of decorum and syntax, merging art and letters as proclamations of the modern.

18. Evans and Wong. "Debutante's Slip" dress, 1996. Hand-cut black Ultrasuede. Gift of Richard Martin, 1996 (1996.252)

Conceptual designers Evans and Wong employed an Emily Post etiquette from 1922 as the text for a dress that would be less than decorous if actually worn by a debutante. But, of course, both the deb and lace are, by the 1990s, archaistic.

19. French. "Alphabet" lace dress, late 1920s. Black cotton lace. Gift of Richard Martin and Harold Koda, 1992 (1992.399 a,b)

This couture dress, lacking a label, metabolizes an alphabet into its lace design, creating a high art of alphabet soup. Juxtaposed with the "Debutante's Slip" dress, this dress answers to an era of propriety, but its own text makes no sense. Cubist collage was composed largely of intelligible language or word-parts, but Surrealism and, to a lesser degree, Futurism and its progeny in concrete poetry favored the kind of floating visual forms of letters and words that appear on this dress.

20. Mary McFadden. The "Book of Kells" coat, spring-summer 1993. Painted quilted silk. Courtesy Mary McFadden

As art historian Otto Pächt described of Insular manuscript pages such as those of the "Book of Kells" and "Lindisfarne Gospels," "The monogram page is always rather like a fortissimo chord dying down in a gradual diminuendo. Legibility is certainly not an aim of the scribe-illuminator. . . . Words behave thaumaturgically, as if they were living figures in pictures." To wear such a coat is to become the living figure within the page transfigured into word, a word made apparel.

21. Elsa Schiaparelli. "Ration-Coupon" evening blouse and handbag, 1940-45. Polychrome printed Rayon crêpe and sequins. Gift of Julia B. Henry, 1978 (1978.288.23 a-e)

Wartime rationing was an indexical and para-monetary system applied to products. Schiaparelli represented the language and practice of rationed items—number of coupons required for each apparel article—on this blouse and handbag.

22. American. Handbag, ca. 1860. Plaited newspaper lined in red silk twill with red silk ribbon bows at the handles. Gift of Richard Martin, 1996 (1996.386.1)

The simulacra of newsprint that appeared in the works of American trompe-l'oeil painters (William Harnett, John Peto, et al.) were anticipated in pragmatic uses of newsprint for decoration and even for accessories such as this handbag. The virtue of recycling is not entirely a late-twentieth-century invention; the reutilization of newspapers was only Thoreauvian American common sense and frugality.

23. American or English. Commemorative man's glove(s), 1824. Suede kid with engraving of Lafayette. Gift of Claggett Wilson, 1946 (46.59.15a,b)

In 1990, historian Paul Hudon associated American celebration and commemoration with marketing motives and especially with textile and apparel products. "Considering that the Americans were avid for new printed fabrics and that American production was virtually nil [at the end of the Revolution], the English producers might have satisfied the market with nearly anything. But by choosing a design with person and achievements that consumers already desired to be identified with, the English producers had half-sold the product before it was made." Lafayette as American patriot was a pleasing association in 1824.

24. Back Cover: Detail of number 1.

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ORCHESTRA
VAUDEVILLE
LANA
CRITER
COCKTAILS
GRADE
GOLD
WHISKEY
ELLINGTON
WORTH